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C O N F I D E N T I A L RABAT 001248

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [MO](#)

SUBJECT: MOROCCO: ELECTORAL CAMPAIGNS HEAT UP IN FES, MEKNES

Classified by Polcouns Craig Karp for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: On a pre-election tour of the Moroccan "heartland," poloffs found broad cynicism towards elections and expectations of low voter turnout, even among some politicians. Fes, a spiritual center with a medieval core, and its imperial twin Meknes are politicized but less modernized than the coastal areas and Marrakech. Our discussions confirmed that youth are generally quite cynical and alienated from political parties and candidates, and will stay away from the polls in droves. Almost everyone we spoke with agreed that the GOM will refrain from tampering with the electoral process but parties and candidates may not. A race for four seats in the second constituency in Fes promises to be especially heated and could get rough on election day.  
End Summary.

People Know the Lingo, But Still Aren't Voting

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¶12. (C) In advance of the two-week campaign "season," which will begin in late August, poloffs undertook a two-day trip July 23 and 24 to Meknes, Fes, and Sefrou, meeting with youth and human rights NGOs, parliamentary candidates (and incumbents), and local government officials. Our conversations with two different youth-oriented NGOs confirmed the prevailing assumption that youth feel alienated from the political process and disenchanted with perceived corruption and ineffectiveness of politicians.

¶13. (C) The importance of political participation in democracy has made its way into the national political discourse -- one youth leader spoke of voting as both a "right and a responsibility," echoing language from recent Royal speeches and civil society get-out-the-vote campaigns. However, most young people complained that politicians paid lip service to people's concerns only during the electoral campaign period. Once in office, promises were immediately forgotten and the office holder was rarely seen in the district. The unempowered demographics -- youth, the poor, unemployed diploma-holders, people living outside the Rabat-Casablanca corridor -- were left out. Young people observed little progress since the last legislative elections in 2002, noting that this year's touted party platforms were "not real programs, just broad strategies."

¶14. (C) This disinterest in the elections is not confined to youth. No one we spoke with had anything but pessimistic predictions of voter turnout. NGO leaders, MPs and local government officials -- including the PJD mayor of Meknes and the independent mayor of Sefrou -- predicted that people will not vote because they do not see tangible results from their elected officials. If people vote, it is only rarely because politicians are able to articulate any real issues to distinguish their ideas from another candidate's. Rather,

they cast their ballots on the basis of tribal or party affiliation, family background, or because of the promise of material reward, whether that award is immediate (vote buying) or hypothetical (fanciful campaign promises like pothole-filling that the candidate may not even have the power to keep).

#### Corruption? The Government Washes Their Hands of It

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¶5. (C) When asked about whether he expected to see corruption on election day, the director of the Fes-based Center for Human Rights echoed an often-expressed sentiment that corruption was unlikely to come from the central government, but that vote-buying and voter intimidation could well occur at local levels where the most bitter, deep-rooted political rivalries play out. Further, he argued that it was not enough for the central government itself to renounce corruption and step back, hoping to lead by example. The state is vacating its responsibilities, he said, by not taking a more pro-active role in seeking out and punishing those who seek to corrupt the voting process, at all levels of power. (Comment: Despite the director's cynicism, his assertion that the GOM will refrain from tampering with election results represents a major step forward in Moroccan politics. There are increasing signs that the government is taking a credible anti-corruption stance. End Comment.)

¶6. (C) Our interlocutors warmly welcomed the idea of international election observers, but some voiced concerns about constraints on the observers' real power. Some, including the director of the Center for Human Rights, said they feared that the observers' presence would be largely symbolic and they would not be able or free to sniff out petty corruption on the local level where it is most likely to occur.

#### Hot Races in Fes

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¶7. (SBU) Whatever the weather, September 7th is shaping up to be a hot day in Fes. Due to government redistricting (in part to limit the number of seats won by the Islamist Party for Justice and Development), the race for four seats in the second constituency in Fes now pits current MP and flamboyant local businessman Aziz Labbour against his bitter rival, the Istiqlal Party's old style strongman Hamid Chabat, as well as Lahcen Daoudi, vice president of the chamber and one of the PJD leaders, and more than a dozen others. During our visit to the constituency, we were regaled with multiple tales of election-inspired violence, voter intimidation, and even mass arson in years past. Fierce rivalry and tit for tat bureaucratic battles among local politicians, most with major commercial interests of their own in the local economy, is widely seen as having stalled the march of development in Morocco's third largest city. A major tourist destination, Fes has literally been left in the dust by rival Marrakech, whose hotel building boom has sustained ever-increasing numbers of foreign visitors in recent years.

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